

# Evaluating Second Language Education

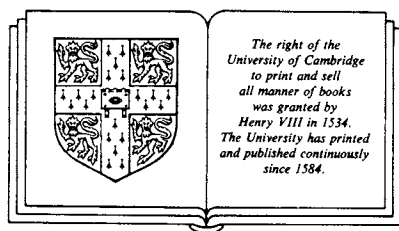
Edited by

*J. Charles Alderson*

Lancaster University

*Alan Beretta*

Michigan State University



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# Introduction

This book examines prominent theoretical and methodological issues in the evaluation of second language education. It offers a range of state-of-the-art case studies, a review of the literature showing how the field got to where it is, and practical advice on how to design and execute evaluations in the field.

As a cursory glance at publishers' lists and the contents of the major journals reveals, the discipline of second language education evaluation has been afforded relatively little attention. By contrast, in general social and educational spheres, provision is routinely made for evaluation, and this emphasis is reflected in their respective literatures. One of the most eminent behavioural scientists of the last 50 years has devoted two recent books to the subject (Cronbach 1982, Cronbach *et al.* 1980) and has called evaluation 'the liveliest frontier of American social science' (1980:13).

In second language education, there has long been dissatisfaction with evaluation which has been methodologically inflexible and uncertain or misguided as to its role. If the published literature is at all representative, it has not been a lively frontier.

This edited collection is designed as a first step in bringing the evaluation of second language education to the cutting edge.

Specifically, this book offers commentary and data intended to foster a self-reflecting attitude in researchers already involved in evaluation and to provide useful input to teacher-training programmes.

In designing the book, it was judged that what an evaluator really needs to know is how to deal with *ad hoc* investigation that appears to have no tradition that can be appealed to. Each inquiry faces apparently unique difficulties. Therefore, to present a series of cleaned-up case studies which give the impression of a smooth operation would not be helpful. Instead it was intended to present a picture of the reality that led to final reports. A range of scholars who were involved in evaluations in diverse parts of the world and whose studies focused on quite different issues were therefore asked to contribute to this book. On the grounds that at this stage of our development, the history of an evaluation is probably more important than its findings, they were asked to spell out

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the decision points when a study took one direction rather than another, and the reasons for them.

This call for histories of evaluation processes is seen by Cronbach *et al.* as appropriate to the development of the field. They write:

Interchanges that occur in private during the planning stages of many other evaluations would have great educative value if written up as candid case studies.

(1980: 169)

Evaluators gain much experience in the course of designing and redesigning a study. Unfortunately, little of that experience is recorded for the benefit of the evaluation community. Rarely does a research report mention the branching points where the study took one shape rather than another or explain why the final plan was preferred [...] Methods of evaluation would improve faster if evaluators more often wrote retrospective accounts of design choices [...] to consider how questions were chosen, how resources were deployed, how quality of data was controlled, and how observations were assembled for communication.

(1980: 214)

The inclusion of case studies in this book has the same purpose: by documenting the histories of actual studies it is hoped to contribute to an understanding of the discipline of evaluating second language education.

The book comprises three parts:

### *Part I: An overview*

This section examines evaluations that have been published in the second language literature and contrasts the lack of development manifested there with what has meantime been learnt in the wider field of educational evaluation.

### *Part II: Case studies*

This section consists of eight histories of evaluation processes, all of which deal with different problems in widely divergent settings. While the focus is on how each evaluator addresses the difficulties central to each study, the findings are also included. All of the chapters have been written especially for this volume and have not appeared elsewhere. All are firmly grounded empirical inquiries rather than speculative position papers. In addition, each chapter is followed by a postscript by the editors of this volume, commenting on the chapter and linking it to the various themes that run through the book.

### *Part III: Guidelines for the design of evaluation projects*

In this final section, the aim is to offer suggestions about how to set up and carry out evaluations in any given setting. The section attempts to

provide a balanced overview and discussion of the issues encountered in the evaluation of second language education, and calls for many sources and types of information. In doing so, this final section reflects the intention of the volume as a whole to furnish insights into the nature of evaluation in a way that is intended to provide practical guidance to would-be evaluators.

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